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La Habana

by

Pedro Xavier Cavazos

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2013

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Boardwalk

You, the tourist, approach by air above the bay like a voyeuristic
angel & the Malecón & the buildings of El Centro
Havana establish where you are; the rubble & ruin—
could be a beat up Atlantic City but it is not.
You, the tourist, glide like a child's
paper plane, one foot above the bay & notice the 1559
Spanish fortress Castillo de la Real Fuerza, built to protect
Spain's investment. This is where the reaping
of humans & gold was stored before heading back across
ocean. You smile as the waves lap
& crack shore-rock then turn
in-on-each-other & flip around like a graceful Olympic
swimmer. Cool, says the wind as it exits left,
over the Malecón's edge & into the water where rock formations
look like broken dock-piers that once held boats closer than a tourist
wallet. You settle in on a street corner in Centro Havana.
You stand outside a hustle shop scam.
Someone needs milk for their dying baby. Some
other one just needs two pesos to buy diapers. A woman
wearing a light-blue wrap on her head crosses
your path from the right. You notice black & grey hair growing
on her chin, like miniature palm trees in the wind. One hair sways

& she smiles as she stares at something further than you can see.

You, the drained tourist, the babbling bleached body in the sun,
you go inside a corner store building.

It is a little store that wants to sell you some flowering pussy,
only, you don't want to buy any, so you tell the man no, but thank you
& in a really nice voice. He laughs when you tell him no.

A group of young boys enter the store & ask you for money, you say no again. Their skin black &
more beautiful than a shiny piece of tar heroin
that entombs ten years worse than a slammed gavel.

You, the converted socialist. You, the Che-Guevara-hat-wearing
chummy-chum-chum & these kids want something from you,
want something more than you can give.

Don't be afraid to partake in the Santeria
chop-a-head-off-a-chicken dinner,
& the Rumba in the street goes *boom, boom, boom*. How about a nice
heirloom for the kids? One boy asks for a peso;
two girls ask for two. The sky, bluer than the 63' Chevy
that just passed outside as you shout no, no, no & the jack hammer
goes *trr, trrr, trrrrr* over the whistle of girls. Over the fifty-gallons
of water for just one flush, over the collapse of the Soviet sickle crush
& just when you are about to give up on this place, a giant & long palm
tree of a silhouetted boy takes up the whole left side
of the frame he entered from. He is taller than the Christ-by-the-bay
Statue! He is blocking all of the sun & is darker than the asphalt

of the People's Communist Square! He winks as his watch falls
 off his wrist as he runs past you into the street, crossing lanes of traffic
 like a kick-off return & you run after him, shouting, "Son, your watch,
 son, you dropped your watch." But you are too slow & the young man
 is getting away like a launched shuttle, like someone about to leave this earth.
 All you can do is think of the children swimming on the other side of the
 Malecón's edge this boy is running towards. The ones swimming
 in the dirty water below, the cement that looks like urban coral reefs
 that will crush him. You can't see any way he is going to make it over
 the crumbling mock pier and not crack open his head right in front
 of your eyes. But this boy is running with the speed.
 So fast the Pesos in his pocket start to spin & make
 a Mario Brothers *ching, ching, ching, ching* sound as he leaps off the top
 of the Malecón & out into the bay like a bomb exploding at the feet
 of a little girl. Like an equation on the board sparking chalk
 into dust & the boy does it, he clears the jump,
 clears everyone lying on the rocks below
 & the rocks themselves, staring up in awe as the boy Jesse Owens'd the leap.
 The leap exploding beyond all of this heat & humidity,
 beyond all of this fear, beyond everything Cold War & Revolutionary & you,
 the pot-bellied tourist do the only thing that is right,
 you open your wallet to him like a caught fish
 split up the belly, your heart & blood rushing out.

Heat

is causing my eyes to play tricks on me.

A bottle is floating just off the coast

of Havana. The top of the bottle bobs

in and out of the water. The bottle

is disappearing in front of the hugeness of ocean,

just like some of the elegant buildings

along Havana's famous boardwalk.

Disappearing, too, are the old Chevys

and their shiny-paint-jobs, cherry-red and sky-blue.

The city is being re-built. Newer European cars

clutter the street. Things are moving fast here

in Havana as a bicycle-buggy-man

pedals me through the street. "Fast!"

I shout, "Really fast."

Airplane

Crashed right through a chain-link-
sixty-foot-fence on the pier. Left the island.
An artist statement for the 2012 international
biennial that takes place almost every other year.
A make-believe fence just like the real
cement wall that fortified Havana in
the seventeenth century. An airplane has just left
the island the way Batista left right before the Revolution.
An airplane has crashed right through
the fence. A fence that strangles like the embargo
or the U.S.-Cuban, Cuban-five tension, enough! A plane has
just left this island and all political parties below—
neutral in the air like a slick politician. There is a small twenty-
meter fence on the Malecón in Havana.
The fence is the culmination of the last
fifty years of Castro and U.S. trade policy—
small but enough to keep the people of Cuba corralled
like cattle. A plane has just left Havana, crashed
right through a chain link fence,
throwing a dark shadow on ocean blue.

Mientras Pescaba en Agues Profundas

The sky, blue like a Cuban day.

The virgin above, watching her children.

A mother and her young son

are in a boat. The mother

is wearing a Cuban flag

on her head, a sanguine bandanna

around her brain. The flag

is hot from the sun and

political whisper. A man-fish

sits in the boat next to the mother

and her son. The man-fish represents

the rest of us here on this island.

Half human and half fish.

Half eating and half waiting to be caught.

Baseball

in Centro Havana.

Six boys play baseball in the shade.

The ball, a white bottle-top-cap. The bases,
three puddles in the chipped-out road, and home
plate, a banana peel. Even on run-down buildings
there is elegant steel work on the cement windows outside.

The spectators, the kids of the neighborhood.

There is a European influence on every doorframe.

Angels plastered above window frames
like clouds. The exterior of most buildings
crumbles out onto the curb—

a Cuban's life here.

The boys playing the baseball game
have hand-eye-speed quicker than a burning fuse;
they hit the cap like it was a beach ball, giant like this earth,
and the tiny Christmas lights draped across the balcony
look like stars above the faded sun. The baseball game
goes on for hours, well past eleven at night,
and there are cheers when someone
finally wins, a team that is, another metaphor.

I can still hear my fifth-grade baseball coach's mantra
in my head: "No I in team."

No I in team.

No I.”

Icebergs

Polar Bears in Cuba's national baseball park.

Seals are drinking mojitos just off the beach

a few were even spotted at Café Neruda.

Venezuela and Cuba are drilling

for oil through ice sheets.

Ocean platform rigs replaced by ice shoes.

There are polar bears in the bay of Havana.

Short-shorts replaced by wool coats and snow boots.

There are icebergs crashing into Havana, scarring

the land like glacial movement over earth.

Cod replaces dolphins and we and the sun

pushing all of this forward like a sail.

There are icebergs in the bay of Havana.

Plenty of ice for all the drinks in the city.

Central Park

rain clears the park benches. A man
dressed in white sits down next to me.
He is missing an eye and I can feel the air
around my head squeeze my brain tight when he looks at me.
He starts to do a little Santeria dance and I give him
some money fast; he smiles as he leaves.
A beggar asks me to buy him a mojito, I say, "No."
The falling rain hits the ground as hard as this city's socialist
propaganda. The Cuban-five, Che and Castro are on every
corner billboard and José Martí is standing above all of this hustling
stuff, all of this Caribbean-open-for-business city. He is pointing
his hand at something in the distance, something none of us here
on the island can see. Something,
something worth dying for.

Sierra Maestra

in old Havana. Art clutters
the street with beauty—
a black woman with a bowl.
Another woman with fruit on her head and she
is smiling with more enthusiasm
than a tropical storm. Smiling
with more openness than the U.S.
trade policy with Cuba. The colors
on the painting more bright
than a Kwanza-cloth and an American-
Christmas tree. Yellow, red, black
white, blue and orange.
Beauty all over the canvas in the streets.
This week, May eighteenth, the biennial,
international art in Cuba, even gay pride!
The women in the paintings are slender—
slender as food during the special period
after the fall of Russia.
Art before 1989 used to have full-figured women.
But since the abrupt end of imports and subsidies
the figures are weak and thin, a sliver of hope
in their expressions, a wide smile—children at play.

The people in paintings in the street
are shadows of what this country once was.
Once, plump like a melon. But now,
twenty-five years after the fall of Russia,
the people in the painting still cannot escape the poverty
of food and electricity, the pit-falls of a two-currency
system, the cell doors of a government
or the lack of paint on the brush.

Proyecto Behind the Wall

There is a wooden cannon on the boardwalk
of Havana, dissected like the people of
Cuba. One leg for the Revolution. One
arm for education. A simple piece of bread
for religion. An eyeball for three sheets of toilet paper.

One intestine for a relative to visit. There is
a wooden cannon on the boardwalk of Havana
protecting the bay like Peter Pan.

I can see an oil tanker off to Venezuela where Hugo Chavez
lives like Castro. I can see all the dreams buried
here on this small piece of land because of what happened
after the Revolution and Castro. "Nothing!" The cannon
waits like progress here in Havana. The cannon
is ready for its turn to defend the country but there are no
more French or English fleets to battle. Spain's influence
on Cuba is on every elegant building structure, the iron
work on the window. But the cannon is waiting
and is red with the blood of the Spanish
and red with the blood of African slaves.

There is a wooden cannon on the boardwalk of Havana.

Se Cuencia en I

There appear to be six baseball
players in the painting, but I believe
there are only two, a pitcher, who is
in the wind-up motion of a pitch
and an outfielder waiting for something
to happen. There is a batter, but he is not seen.
The Cuban flag is behind the players
and is the only thing in three-dimension.
The players are the people of Cuba.
Baseball, the metaphor. This is not
a child's game. There is a sequence
beginning to emerge. The unseen batter
is Fidel. The players, the people
of Cuba waiting for something to happen.
Maybe Fidel will smack a good one
right out of the park. Maybe Fidel
will hit a homerun and win the game, or
maybe, Fidel will just strike-out
and not even swing the bat. Maybe he will just crouch
there, squatting like someone ready to take a crap.

Possible Chances

There are eight red doors on the Malecón
in Havana—eight red doors on the boardwalk.
The Malecón is ninety miles away from Florida.
Florida is a state in the United States of America.
America is ninety miles away from Cuba.
Each door of the installation is a different size
than the others. Cuba and America are different sizes
than each other. A person of any size, or any country,
could find a door just right for their sized body and go through.
The installation is inclusive then—equal
for all. A possible chance for all of us, I suppose.
If a tourist were to walk through any of the doors,
back and forth, fast or slow, on a Sunday or Monday,
then that tourist could still leave Cuba, and the ocean
that is the landscape of this island would not be a prison sentence.
But for Nafal, a boy here on the Malecón, there is no chance
of ever leaving, so he just laughs as I try to figure out
the installation, going through the doors.
Nafal is twelve years old. He looks up at me
again and says, “The red on the doors
of the installation is the blood of the people of Cuba,
the blood of all the people who have lived and died

here on this island.” I look hard at Nafal, his black hair a silhouetted dot on the blue of ocean water and horizon sky. Nafal shouts at me over the sound of waves crashing on the rocks below. “It is a Mirage!” He says. “There are no chances here.” “You mean ironic?” I say as I walk closer to him. Nafal goes on, “There is no possible chance for any of us here in Cuba. No matter how many times I walk through those doors I will always be in the same place.” Nafal stares hard at a jet airplane overhead, all of this—over mine.

A Young Boy

from the coast of Cardenas. The boy's mother, Elizabeth,
was said to have bought her way onto a raft
with her son, Elian. They were trying to reach Miami.
Birds hover above the bay of Havana and small cirrus
clouds make thin wisps in the sky. The wisps look like
coffee plantation chains that strung slaves tighter than
a stitched baseball glove in the eighteen hundreds—
two countries' pastime. This boat and that boat, but what about
all the trash-strung-together rafts that dared
the water from Cuba to Miami. The broken
heaps of family members the oars of the journey,
this boat and that boat. Today a small boat from
Haiti capsized in the Atlantic. The entire
crew died and the crew were welcomed by the ghosts
of all the slave brothers and sisters who
reside at the bottom of the Atlantic. Scattered
across the ocean with all the plastic and oil. A styrofoam
Cup of Noodles holding up the entire continent. Today
a boy has gone missing from Cuba,
adrift somewhere in the Straits of Florida.

Departing

In an inner tube, floating
the Straits of Florida fishermen snagged
you, alone, at sea, Elian. Just like the two
fishermen and a slave boy who found The
Statue of Virgin Mary drifting in 1608,
holding a Christ child figure. They delivered him
safely on a board across the water, The Virgin of Charity,
Cuba's patron saint. Then, almost four-hundred
years later, on the day of family,
food and celebration,
you, Elian, were pulled from the water.
Dolphins protected you, circling your inner tube,
and tiger sharks circling them. The news said
you were adrift for three days. But the doctors said
you had no signs of being submerged in water,
no signs of heat or exhaustion, no signs of the sea.

Hiding

like something stolen. Outside
the night sky lit by a small vigil of Cuban
Americans and news reporters.
The two countries' flags planted
in the front yard of your uncle's house
like two tropical trees reaching up to heaven.
Then the raid, white vans rolling over the fence,
immigrants crossing a border. I.N.S. agents in full
riot gear and they are looking for you, Elian, the lost
miracle boy who survived the sharks and ocean
and heat of the sun. Whose mother lies at the bottom
of the Atlantic. And they are coming for you,
Elian, with a hunger stronger than an ocean current,
with a speed faster than the wind that brought you here.

Forgotten

There must have been a momentary memory lapse

like a forgotten vow or a sin, later confessed.

How else could most of America

have got it so wrong?

Keeping you here, Elian, like your father

was dead. Like you arrived right out of the

Bible, delivered safe in a basket from the sea.

The miracle boy and the Holy Spirit

so strong we all forgot how to act. All of us

speaking in tongues to keep you here, Elian.

All of us lost in the spirit, thanking God

for you, Elian. A sign of our faith.

Catholics thanking the Virgin Mother

but forgetting about the father.

Tiger Shark

The child belongs with the father

Por supuesto

But the father cannot have the child

Lo siento

The father loves the child

And the child loves the father

But the father is in Cuba

And the child is in Miami

The father must come to America

Por supuesto

The father must cross the ocean

Like the son

The water must welcome the father

The water protected the son

The son lived in the water

The water lived in the son

Hallelujah

The moon will protect the child

The moon will rise with a thousand hallelujahs

Por supuesto

The dolphins sang hallelujahs—

all night and all day.

Torus

Begin with a parametric equation
defining relations.

Let Y stand for Cuba,

D = distance (X the number
of Cuban refugees)

already living in Little Havana.

So $Y+D(X) =$

“But the boy is ours!” Castro shouts

in a dream or no dream. The tone

of Castro’s voice, dry as a drought.

The position and velocity of his speech,

abstract communist theory. But isn’t this plea

the sum total of a representation? Isn’t a father’s

voice distinct as a mother’s nipple?

So...abstractly, this parametric,

is a set of definitions &

equations based solely on human science

& not national surface tension.

The science and policy of the ability to bend

like the inner tube stretches & folds.

The ability to inflate the way a tube does.

The ability to roll,

to float,

to save.

Cira, Sus Partes En Mi Paisaje

The painting is ghostly. Half apparition and
half physical things, like a bench and a girl.

The girl appears to be in deep thought like this island.

She is looking at something no one can see and I
think this is what Elian Gonzalez's mother
must have looked like the morning before she took
her son. Elian's mother was looking at something
no one else could see—a future perhaps.

Some better horizon for her and her son. The girl
in the painting looks tired, like the heat and this
weather. She is holding a book.

I pretend it is the poems of Jose Marti.

The girl in the painting is vanishing—half
here and half gone like Elian's parents—
one in the Atlantic and the other one in the
motherland. The girl in the painting is
vanishing, taking all the courage with her,
with her, to face the sea.

Maria Teresa

living in America. Yes, it is true, fifty-one years ago
I was uprooted like a plant someone wanted to kill.
Now, fifty-one years later I am back in my country.
When I was twelve I was taken in a plane to escape Cuba
and the politics of Fidel Castro. Although I have never met Castro,
he impacted my life like a traumatic father. I am a girl
of this land—Cuba. I left when I was twelve.
My brother was eight and my sister fourteen.
The problems in this country were so big
we needed to cross an ocean. We were taken to the airport,
my brother and sister and I, separated and sorted like trash,
flown to Dubuque, Iowa, where we stayed
with the McGhee Family who had nine children of their own.
Finally, when my mother arrived a year later, we settled in Rhode Island.
Funny, we left a real island to move to a state,
which isn't an island but is called one.

Mirror

1.

Sometimes my friends will ask me, when we are out for dinner

and the mood becomes as close as a full moon,

my friends will ask, how could your parents have left you,

there at the airport, when you were just twelve?

Your brother and sister barely any younger or older. Sometimes

they will ask, “How could your father have known?”

How could he have let any of you go on a plane and over the gulf

without knowing for sure if he would ever see you guys again? *Como?*

Pusupesto, this is not Disney’s Peter Pan, no fairy-tale ending.

My father said he thought we would be back in one month.

Then my father and my mother thought six months; a year later

our mother came to America. We ended up in Iowa,

then Rhode Island. All three of us, my sister and brother and I,

all ended up with university degrees and worked for the state.

No Hollywood mythical production, but sometimes when I cry myself

to sleep, I dream of my father and wish Peter Pan to the rescue.

2.

My mother Virginia came to America shortly after us,
one year I believe—the Midwest is dry and hot in July.

The Cuban government didn't let my father leave,
this is called kidnapping anywhere else in the world.

My parents are scattered like the trash on the beaches
in Havana. Castro has failed us all but the people on the
island don't see this. I am not political! I am not counter-
Revolutionary or Revolutionary but I am a daughter of Cuba
and I recognize the crime of the Revolution. My house
is not my house anymore; it was stolen like Cuba.

Someone is living in my house who did not pay for it.

Thieves' kids are enjoying my toys, my dress, and my food.

“Thieves' kids,

thieves, thieves, thieves.”

Enrique

this island. In 1962 he had three houses.

My uncle sold his houses—he was
preparing to leave—getting things
in order. After he applied for his exit
visa he was fired from his job. My uncle
waited several months before his paperwork
was in order. Finally, when Enrique was granted
permission to leave Cuba, at the airport,
while he was sitting on the plane, government
men came aboard the plane and removed him.

The men told my uncle he had to give back the money
from his houses, that since the Revolution those were
not his houses anymore, that if he wanted to leave
he had to leave with nothing. Thieves, these men,
these were his houses, his money, his life
work, but Enrique wanted to leave and he knew
there was no other way. So my uncle left Cuba
with nothing, and that is why my mother
would always say, “Oh, your Uncle Enrique
arrived here in Florida broke but full of dreams!”

Eduardo

1.

Could make magic on his examination table.

Could put the smoke of a stick on a knee

of a child and make that child's knee feel better.

My father, Eduardo, was keen to human intuition

and the magic of willpower. He knew when it was time

to get his kids off the island. But the government

wouldn't let my father leave to join us in Iowa,

and later in Rhode Island. His absence, a scar buried.

We were apart for three years but my father

was a smart man and he thought of a plan. He bought

a boat and began to learn to fish. Then one day, he cast

his net so far out in the night, that he never came back.

2.

My father had a friend, a friend who was a fisherman.

In the cool of the night and the loneliness under stars,
my father's friend would talk about wanting to take his family
to Miami, if only he had a boat. "A boat!" my father shouted
when he was denied papers to leave Cuba. My father
needed a boat and a friend to help him cross the sea.

Not the kind of friends we had at the Miramar Yacht Club,
where I would spend my summers as a child,
but the kind of friends who knew how to fish
and could show my father how to throw a net.

So my father Eduardo and his friend who was a fisherman,
bought a boat and began fishing every day and night.

The two men, my father and his friend, became regulars
in the bay of Havana. Each day the two would go—
my father and his friend—go and practice their routine
in the water. Each day they would go out a little further
and practice their escape. The day my father and his friend
were going to leave to America the harbor police told them
they couldn't go out to sea. "Why?" my father asked but the
police said nothing. My father's friend already

had his whole family inside the boat, his wife and two kids,
underneath and stored and now they couldn't leave! My father
thought quick, he knew the guards liked to drink so he brought them

a bottle of rum. After a few drinks my father, walked over to the men and begged them to let him and his friend go out to fish. He told them he had no food and had a hungry family waiting for him at home. My father told them that when they had a few fish they would come right back and wait until morning to continue to fish. After a few more drinks, the guards didn't mind if my father and his friend went out to fish. That night my father, Eduardo, was fishing for his family, that night, he was fishing for us.

3.

When my father's voice was so far out at sea
that the guards couldn't hear him anymore,
the guards realized my father and his friend were trying to escape.
The guards got in a boat and chased after my father
and his friend. My father remembers going so fast
it was like a rock skipping on the water or the speed
of the Revolution as it spread across the island. That night
the water was the roughest my father had ever seen it.
My father said the guards were shooting bullets
at him and his friend for twenty miles.
"Castro, this is no way to treat your children,
if we were ever yours at all."

El Gran Fascita

Dark deep red dominates
the background like a cut-
open body, the blood spilling onto the land
and people—good thing healthcare
is socialized. Mussolini
would be proud of both the painting
and Castro—both an homage.
The great bull on a podium
exciting the crowd—words of
solidarity and strategy for the
nation! The cadence of gods.
The mother island!
But the masses are crammed
together like the people of the rafts.
The people of the rafts and the masses
cannot escape the round-up and
corralling, the deflated raft or the ocean—
the stampede and the slaughter.

And a Tourist

The center Mother figure nurses two cows. They grow.
 Her heart, bleeding-eyes stitched open—
 commentary on the country. Forever a gaze and a mouth sown shut.
 Say with me the sound of religion, Santeria orange-red-blue-hue.
 The mother's hair stretches to the sky and lights the stars—
 Do you believe? This endless circle of snakes—
 Eden. The next snake coming out of the mouth
 of the next, and next. So, you too, are next
 in this cycle, just beyond the edge of this painting,
 somewhere within the walls of the Havana
 Fine Arts Museum, and you too are starting to believe.
 You, the fair-skinned tourist from Canada or
 France. You, the middle-aged educator and in your mind
 you are dancing with Changó, the young symbol of courage
 and sex in the Yoruba religion, and you want to believe in this
 painting the way you believe in Changó, the fearless god that devours
 you like a mango. The snake bites the cow. There are five
 children with four eyes. A dagger through the tongue
 of one of the children. The next child has two
 heads and is hanging upside down like a swinging
 monkey. The painting is large like an ocean, deep
 blue. The other three children are morphing into

something else—half human, half animal, a metaphor
for this country. A chicken perhaps—not you, the tourist,
but a child in the painting—standing on a snake and milk is pouring
out of her nipples that are really her ears, the mother of Cuba—
Castro and the Virgin—everything in the landscape is being heard
and said and drunk. The last boy child has an enlarged head,
the alpha and the omega—
the father and son, clearly, he is Fidel.

Atlantic

The boy saint who walks with one foot on the breast
 of every woman. Changó the red and white flash
 on the water like an aqua firework—the wind pushes.
 Changó who will work with the speed of slaves
 in the bedroom for his worshipers. The bedsheets will be colored
 red and will wave in the breeze of the sweet work and
 ferocious pace of the sex until the bed is soaked wet
 with sweat and no open-window will cool the room.
 And the followers of Changó will raise up
 and shout from their mouths as they cum.
 This is Changó in the sea. And the follower's mouths will open
 like a flower in bloom and the room will glow hallelujahs
 on the wall and hallelujahs will swim in the ocean with the dolphins and
 all the beautiful tuna. Hallelujahs in the sea and Changó
 in the bay catching fish, hallelujahs! Changó in the port of
 Cien Fuegos, not even one hundred fires could keep him out.
 Hallelujahs to Changó in the night.
 Hallelujahs to Changó in the day.
 Hallelujahs to Changó de la mar.
 Changó-lito in the heart.
 Hallelujahs in the mouth.
 Hallelujahs, hallelujahs, hallelujahs—

swimming all the way
down the throat.

El Santuario de Regla

I can smell the incense of worship
to Changó as women line the sidewalk
with prayers to sell. I bow my head
and pray for rain, the smell and temperature
the same as the Revolution in the Mountains. But this is only
a dream and Spanish men on horses are chasing me
across a sea and whipping my back in the name of their
god and gold. I weep as I tend the fields, chop the cane.
The sharp stalks of cane on my back and feet—
a crucifixion and I breathe the Church's air as my eyes open
from my slumber on a wooden pew.
I am sitting in front of La Vigen de Regla—
the black virgin that protected the slaves
on this island. The black virgin that swam
with Elian in the ocean—the virgin who coated
his skin with sunblock—the virgin who patted
the dolphins in the sea, who led dolphins in circles
around Elian—who bartered with the sharks—
who flashed a shine of a water ripple
to a helicopter pilot in the horizon.

Castigos a los esclavos

The plantation is lively this morning
with foot-stomp and rain beating on the roof
above cooling bread next to a wood fire. A station for working
in the fields and beating slaves' laundry on a line.

The smell of the chimney smoke burning through nostrils
makes me think of the taste of sugar in my coffee.

Two slaves are shackled by their necks to a piece of
wood on the ground, their white pants shade their legs
from the heat. A slave-master stands above the two
slaves like God. Another slave master is dragging a human
through the mud, he whips both the human and a horse.

Twenty more slaves are waiting their turn.

The sugarcane is sweet on the teeth and lip.

How sweet a crop can become over time.

Slaves push a wagon through the field.

Concentration Camp Hens

Cluck-cluck.

Fidel, you always have the best ideas.

Cluck.

The best thoughts, out of all the thoughts in the world,
you always have the best ones,

cluck-cluck.

Fidel, you always have the best suits, out of all the suits
in the world, yours are always the best.

Cluck.

And the best smoke comes out of your mouth, Fidel,
take it from us hens,

cluck-cluck.

Smoke from the best cigars in the world,

por supuesto,

cluck.

Always the best, Fidel,

cluck-cluck.

Until, until, until you silence the artists
and homosexuals in your gulag,

cluck-choke.

Until you silence the sun with walls.

Choke, choke, "Choke-puke."

Concentration Camp Hoe

Fidel,

there has been enough dirt broken,

enough soil turned up to the sun.

My great grandmother chipped rocks early in her life

when the Revolution

was still a song children sang.

But Fidel!

Today crime and prostitution are on the rise!

Aren't you glad you shut

down all the brothels and casinos,

closed down

the ocean around us.

But what do I know—

I just keep chipping away

at this rock,

this dirt, this land.

La Virgen Del Melón

The painting looks child drawn.

The children are the rivers of

Cuba. Things are drawn crudely.

People are piggish or ghoulish but playful.

There is a great big watermelon god or saint

and the virgin hovers above the fruit

like a cloud. Palm trees and a river,

this must be the dream of the Revolution.

The Revolution that trained in the mountains—

the Revolution that gave birth

to the art in the museum. This art that stormed

Havana or possibly Fidel's July 26th

movement that took this island by force.

This must be the dream. His dream.

Blue clouds and lots of happy little

people, crudely drawn while they rest

and wait and dream about god

and the melons.

Trinidad

on the beach reminds me of the people of Havana—
bunched together and tied by-the-left-behind-policies
of America. The sun
hidden like Castro or the ability to find
toilet paper here on this
island. Thunder fills the sky.
Gulls swoop for their dinner.
A tourist could not tell where
the horizon begins and the sea
ends. The politics of Cuba
blurred by all the grey weather—
on a ration card, newborn babies
get a pound of coffee a month.
In the resorts in Trinidad, Cuba,
there is toilet paper to wipe a butt. A hurricane
is on the horizon turning everything
up on the beach—queers getting locked up
on the streets and beat—
so much conflict
in the water—a jellyfish sting.

Mangos

look like Christmas tree ornaments
with long stems. Pineapples grow
low to the ground—miniature palm trees
with sweets on the vine. There is no need for more than
the necessary clothing. Humidity becomes air you can wear.
People are stranded in Cien Fuegos, the roads will take
two days to repair from the rain. Sitting on
the beach I see a ship headed to Europe or
Central America. I dream of building a boat.
A boat of raincoats and rope, duct-tape
and glue. Straw and newspaper. Later I build
an oar with palm leaves, the intricate knot work
I learned from braiding my sister's hair in prison.
I dream I am a captain of the Revolution.
Castro, Che and I squatting on a little boat
from Mexico, squatting like a hero's crouch
or leap, before the sudden attack. The mango
hanging from the branch.

Obra en Portada

The sky is indigo and shimmers with yellow
squiggly-lines from the stars.

A green-tree-bush with a turquoise bottom
base and branches like hair blowing. The green in the tree is alive
like the ocean. Behind me, the city, Havana
is awake like this painting—girls on Obispo
Street, where cobbled stone alleyways make
hell on a fashion girl's foot, sore from the walk
the girls drink rum on the second
floor of the Bacardi building where a D.J.
secretly says, "Blow jobs for forty bucks."

People aren't sure if he means him or the girls.
The painting has a pulsating night sky like
music played on Friday nights on the Malecón—
Cuban singing and the clapping and foot
stomping and the rum on the street with tobacco
in the air and nostril. In the painting there is a woman
standing at the base of the tree. She is the mother
of all of us, alive and dead. She is nursing a Kimodo
dragon. The Kimodo dragon is standing on top
of the ground and on top of the figures of small
ghostly people, half-fed, half-starved.

What Castro Wanted

A Tropicana cruise ship
is anchored in the middle
of Havana harbor, the cruise
ship in the middle of the bay is as ugly
as the embargo. No toilet paper
to wipe an asshole, and a three hour wait for bread.
I don't think this is what Castro wanted
for his children when he designed a plan
deep in the Sierra Meastra Mountains.
Somehow I don't think Castro saw a
luxury cruise ship with Germans and French
tourists drinking mojitos on the deck.
This can't be what the country went guerilla
for. Prostitution is on the rise just like
global warming—\$60 for a fuck and somehow
I can't see how any of this is what Castro killed for.
A two-currency country that favors bellhops
over real docs. Pardon me,
Mr. Castro, but I don't think
this is what you started fighting for.

Hotel National

I feel like Errol Flynn with bread, except
without a fifteen year old girlfriend.
I don't have any money to buy the things
I want in the street—Cuban rebel girls.
On Friday nights the Malecón below
is alive with music and love—
a young couple, barely
fourteen, embrace and kiss like
a small hurricane, maybe this is why Errol
Flynn thought he should have such a young girl.
The tension and emotion of the young couples
bodies beginning to form clouds above the bay.
But from up here, above all of this bustle, I can't
help but feel privileged. The hotel
wall is bigger than the embargo. The hotel
is privilege. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jimmy
Carter and Uma Thurman come here
to smoke cigars. Errol Flynn, an uncensored Kennedy—
had everything for the taking
of his mouth. The Hotel is privilege
and the street is not. But the street is alive
with grandmothers and nieces and women

selling peanut crackers and flowers even some
rum. A wealthy woman sitting next to me
out on the patio says, "Look at them all!
Boy there is a lot of them! They sure look
like they are having fun." Like the people
of Havana could not possibly be able to have
fun. Like being stuck on a island with no toilet
paper and little food and no jobs and little
money could possibly stop people from having fun.
I said, "Like, like, like motherfucking like!"
and left as I tipped my Mojito over the edge
of the table and it spilled onto the woman's foot.
"Sorry," I said. "Look at all the rum!
Everywhere! And so much of it."

Parque

Three girls are practicing their beauty.
One older girl, twelve, rides a bike
with her little sister sitting on the front
handlebars. They ride in circles in the park
and their smiles are as big as the sea. A friend
of theirs is following behind with a camera
and all three girls stop from time to time
to take another picture of each other; then they all run
behind the camera to look at the instant image.
The sky lights up even more than it already is
when they smile and laugh at their photos.
I can't help but think how sad it is
that there is no way for these girls
to print the photos, that the Revolution
has left the people of Cuba to go without things—
but to be full of life the way these girls are
here in the park. No photos to put in a frame
or in an album. I shout out loud, "What will happen to the camera
when the batteries die?" The existence of the photos—
the girls—so much energy, the flame of the lighthouse in the port.

Boticelli, Hokusai y Los Tiburones

A shark is leaping out of the ocean

the way Batista left this island.

A shark is leaping out of the ocean

the way Castro leaped away from his Revolutionary
rhetoric—free elections in eighteen months!

A shark is leaping out of the ocean.

Mermaids are behind the sea—a horizon

of clam shells and beautiful girls whose

long hair mixes with the waves of the sea the way

Africa and Spain have mixed on this island. A shark

leaps; is leaping out of the ocean and Raul Castro's

daughter fights for gay rights the way dolphins

fought to protect Elian—delicate but effective.

Be careful! A shark is leaping out of the ocean.